

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INFORMANT: STEVE SCHMIDT
CONDUCTED BY: TOM RANKIN**

**S = STEVE
T = TOM**

LFP TR-R038

S: Are you going to ask questions?

T: I'm going to (--) Yeah. First I guess, just so we uh, so I know some, could you, let's talk a little bit about your background, and so that we also know, you know, how we got involved with this work. Where, where were you born? When? That sort of thing basically.

S: Okay. Uh, born Washington, D. C., 1945. Uh, but my mother's family was from the Boston area. I think when I was quite young, around four, I, we came back to Boston and I grew up in Boston. (T: Umhm) Um, and uh, I was in a Roman Catholic Seminary for what that is worth, rather than say college. But that was during the Vietnam era. And I decided to leave the Seminary and uh, I made a decision that I didn't want to be involved in the fighting war. And the army wouldn't take me as a non-combatant, and so I was accepted by Peace Corps. And I went to Thailand as a Peace Corps volunteer back in '68. Uh, I stayed as a volunteer for three years, and then stayed on in Thailand on my own (T: Uh huh) for another fifteen and a half years in various capacities. I taught English for many years at the uh, well for two years at the University level, then I went to Bangkok and began working on my degree, my, my Masters in philosophy. I took my Masters in Bangkok, um, and then actually before I got my degree I started teaching philosophy in universities in Bangkok, and then up in North, in [name unclear] University. The day before I received my degree in Bangkok, a friend of mine gave me the name of somebody working with the Refugee Resettlement Program in Bangkok. I called them and they said they wanted me. I said when? They said yesterday. (T: Umhm) They were literally taking people off the street. Um, and because of my language ability, um, I guess I was somewhat desirable too. So I, that began, in 1979 I began three years work with refugees in Thailand. Two of those years were with [name unclear], which was a, the non-profit organization contracted by the State Department to do the paper work on the refugee seeking resettlement in the states. So we had, we actually became advocates for the refugee, although that wasn't our mandate, partly because and this is a value judgment, you'll get it on the record, because the INS, Immigration and

Naturalization Service people tended to be somewhat less than sympathetic to the plight of the refugees. (T: Uh huh) So although our mandate was specifically the paperwork creation, and funneling into the INS Officer for interview, we ended up being somewhat of an advocate as well. I did that for two years. For one year I worked on a development program on a refugee camp, uh, developing a variety of skills, language skills, mathematical skills, typing skills, construction skills. The idea was that if the refugee went to the states they'd have some kind of skill to bring with them. Uh, I was working for an English non-profit organization at that time. It was called [name unclear] Adventure. I did that for one year. Um, after that I was burned out. I went to live in a monastery for a year to calm down, to cool out. And um, then I got a job working for International Human Assistance Programs, which is an American based non-profit. And I worked together with Thai Government Officials in a Community Development Program for two and a half years. So that was another extension of services related work that I had been doing. So um, that was my experience in, in Thailand working specifically directly with the service oriented field.

T: And then what, what brought you here? When did you come?

S: I came back to that states not a year ago now. It was on October 30, 19, last year, '86. I came back mainly to be with my family, (T: umhm) as especially my mother was getting older. Um, and my plan was, and I followed it out for six to nine months to be a strict volunteer. (T: Umhm) And get in and around the Human Services area to find out what was going on, and to make contacts. (T: Right) And that's what happened. And one of the contacts I made was this one. Uh, they were at that time, this organization was at that time, this must be around March or April when I was beginning to seriously look. I had made several contacts and I was beginning to seriously consider that I needed full time employment, because a volunteer doesn't pay very much. And um, this office wanted me. They were going through some personnel changes at that time. I was first considered for Director. And then they got a Laotian woman who was going to do that. Um, so I came on as employment, um, job counselor. (T: Umhm)

In the meantime, the Laotian woman who was going to be Director, she got a scholarship to BU. So she left. So I sort of moved up. (T: I see) And now I am Director. (T: Okay) So my contact with refugees, especially Southeast Asian refugees began back in '79. And although I left refugee work in '82, '79 to '81, '82, um, I maintained a contact with the refugee community, specifically, or mostly with people working in the refugee community um, in the intervening years. (T: Umhm) I also worked with Community Development in Thailand, and that was another connection with the service oriented field. Besides the language skill that is an obvious advantage, do you find that there's a, that there's an advantage in knowing the refugee situation on the other end, so to speak?

S: Uh, obviously I think that's, I think that's for sure. Um, in the more difficult moments, or when I have the presence of mind to step back and, and reflect, of course I can uh, you know, reflect upon some of the hell they went through. I can appreciate that. And um, um, that's I think a given for anybody who's been through that situation. Um, although we tend in the day to day affairs maybe to forget those facts and those events. I think very certainly so it's an added element, a positive element for anybody who wants to work in this field.

T: What exactly, let's just go through what this organization is. You know, official title, and how long it's been around, and some of those just (--)

S: Uh, it's officially called the Laotian American Organization of Greater Lowell Incorporated. It has gone itself through a kind of series of changes over the period of three years. I think with this title, and with its non-profit status, I think it actually began not quite, or just about two years ago. Um, prior to that it had been called the Laotian Mutual Assistance Association. Um, for a variety of reasons that was sort of um, what should we say, disbanded? (T: Umhm) And upon the framework if you will, or whatever was left over, this new organization was built. Um, okay that was our official (--)

T: [Unclear] non-profit was [unclear].

S: Yeah, we're non-profit, uh, and the specific mandate is, is multi-service um, to the Laotian refugee, um, specifically. We, since we are non-profit uh, we get our funding right now primarily from state and city contracts. (T: Umhm) Which means the money comes partly from the state and partly from the Federal Government through the state agency. (T: Umhm) Um, we have two, now we have three contracts. Two with the City of Lowell, one with the State of Massachusetts. They mandate a lot of the way that we operate. They allow us to stay open, um, but um, they give us very specific things we have to do in terms of not only reporting requirements, but also services that have to be provided. Specifically English as a second language, which we do every morning from nine to twelve, and employment related services, that is finding jobs for refugees. And giving some kind of guidance counseling education to the refugee into the, the mystery of finding a job. And the third contract is a, it's a kind of overall contract to hire a ethnic Laotian as an outreach worker. So it's a very broadly based, very broadly worded contract. It gives us a large variety, uh, or a large scope within which to work. Um, these contracts are, are very generous in, in some respects, and they do allow us to stay open. And they do allow us to do what actually constitutes maybe seventy, or sixty percent of our other work. (T: Uh huh) See, and although, although we're being funded almost like ninety percent for job counseling and E.S.L., those constitute I would say um, forty, at the very very most, fifty percent of our real work. (T: Okay) Uh, the other things we're doing, I guess the word multi service encompasses it. And um, uh, a form that I have if I can find it that will sort of go down the list of things that we in fact do do, um, or report on on a regular basis. Well I can't find it handily, so. Housing, family problems, divorce problems, or wife beating, or child beating, or husband beating, although that's very rare. Um, um, any kind of utility matter, you know, pay the bill. Or why is the bill more expensive this month? Or how do I get a phone put in my house? How do I change the phone number, or change the name of the uh, the, the owner of the phone. Um, rent problems. Any other kind of housing problem. Too many people living in the place. Fire hazard. Safety problems. Fire. Um, um, police and crime problems. Legal problems. A lot of consumer problems, especially with automobiles.

T: Is that right?

S: Yeah. Sometime, most of it is a result of the ignorance of the, our client the refugee. Either ignorance of language, and/or ignorance of the system. Frequently it's that ignorance combines with the less than above board ethics of the (T: vendor), of the vendor. Um, and so I frequently

have occasion to call Better Business Bureau, or Community Teamwork, which is the Lieutenant Governors people here in Lowell who help us in consumer issues. A lot of that.

T: Can you give, without mentioning name or businesses, as an example of a story of this.

S: Yes, I can. Uh, a Laotian refugee bought a car at a, one of these like corner lot car dealerships, second hand car. Paid a thousand bucks for it. Was told by the vendor, now I'm, I'm quoting the refugee. (T: Umhm) And I talked to, okay I'll go direct to the story. And the, now the refugee doesn't speak good English, so there is a possibility he missed, he misunderstood. But he was told he claims, that for fifteen dollars the dealer would, of the second hand car would take care of the Inspection Sticker for him. He paid the fifteen dollars, didn't get a receipt of course, and was told to come back in two weeks. The law of course says the Inspection Sticker has to be on within seven days. And any complaint on a second hand car has to be made within ten days. (T: Okay) Okay. He was told come back in fourteen days. He went back in fourteen days and was told to pay another fifteen dollars and come back in three more days, which he did. His fifteen dollars were returned, and he was told that the dealership didn't do that. He immediately brought the car out to three different garages to get the inspection sticker, and it failed. Then he came to me. I brought the car, or I told him to bring the car to the station across the street, and for him to do an estimate. He estimated it would cost at least five hundred dollars to get the car on the road. [sounds of traffic in background] Law states if uh, to the, a second hand car on the road is, costs more than 10% of the purchase price, that's a lemon and the dealer has to accept the car back, and take care, or take care of it. Obviously the guy had the law on his part, on his side. (T: Right, right) So I contacted CTI, I contacted BBB, and we went through the regular complaint format. It's still up in Limbo. I have heard that the refugee managed to uh, get the car repaired for about four hundred dollars. I think he may be driving it, I'm not sure.

T: Is that a uh, when you, and if you as, as a Director here were to go, and maybe you did, directly to the dealer and present the case.

S: Yeah, I, that's good. I forgot that part of the story. I called the dealer. Of course, and my, being objective, although I'm an advocate for the refugee, (T: yeah) I try to maintain my objectivity. I'm already feeling angry, but I'm telling myself, okay, let's get to the other side of the story, because this is America. I called the dealer and I said uh, you know, I said as nicely as I could, as professionally as I could, "this is the situation as the refugee has told me. I'd like to get your side of the story, just so that we have it, you know, on the record." He says, "who are you?" I says, "I told you. I work for this organization. We're a non-profit multi service agency." He says, "I don't have to talk to you." I says, "yeah I know you don't have to talk to me, but I'm trying to get the record straight." He said, "are you a lawyer?" I says, "no." He says, "I'll talk to a lawyer." And he hung up. (T: Hm) So my as objective assessment of the situation that I can make is that this guy knew what he was doing from the word go, and was taking advantage of a person who uh, lacked communication skills and understanding American society to deal with this.

T: Right. Do you all warn future potential buyers?

S: I have on that sign behind you in red written in the Laotian language says that particular

dealership (--) No, down there. You see that one? Yeah. (T: Down there?) Yup, that one in red says, that dealership is a no no for our Laotian.

T: "J.M. Auto" it says.

S: Yeah, okay. Now it's on the record.

T: Okay. You know that's funny. I came in here the day that you weren't there, when you had your accident. (S: Umhm) And I sat here for awhile, and I was looking around. Of course I can't read that sign, but I saw J.M. Auto Sales. And I immediately interpreted that sign to be, you know, if you're going to buy a car, (S: go look) this is certainly where to go. So, and that's out in North Chelmsford isn't it? I know it's on Gorham Street.

S: Yeah, it's in Gorham. Yeah.

T: I've been looking for it as I've driven around wondering if I would see a lot of Laotians buying cars. [Both laughing]

S: No, if it's a good place I write it in blue or green. If it's a bad place I write it in blue, or green. If it's a bad place [unclear] red. I specifically chose the color red for that. Um, and we have a newsletter um, which is the white paper in Laotian language to the left and above. Now I haven't written up a J.M. on that one, but in the future I plan also to put things like that in the newsletter. Actually this is the, this is the newsletter. It's our very first one. I'm just getting it ready to go under our non-profit um, (T: postage) postage. Uh, but they're, Post Office requirements are rather sticky. So it's going to take another day or two before I can do that.

T: Now those are always in Laotian?

S: Ideally I would like to have it bilingual, simply because uh, there are Americans that I would like to receive (--)

T: Like myself.

S: Yourself, or people on our Board, or the former Director. So, but that's further down on (--) I have as you see, this is my own personal computer that I have here. Um, I have in, at home, a word processing program that works in Laos. It will print out Laos, it will work Laos on the screen. Um, but it's in the five and a quarter in disc format. I have a program that will convert to the small format, and eventually I hope to train staff to start working in that. Then we can do it in both Laos and English hopefully. Where this is handwritten. (T: Right) Typing, although we have, nobody can type Laos. I'd love to get somebody trained. They, they, it takes them an hour to type one page. [Phone rings] Excuse me. "Laotian office, this is Steve, may I help you? Hi Larry, how are you. You know, I've been working on it, but I'm here all by myself in the office today. I'm going to stay late to get it finished. Uh, the earliest I can promise is tomorrow morning. Yeah, I know. Uh, what can I do. I'm one person in the office Larry. I'll do my best. I expect to be working till 9:00 p.m. tonight. Bye now."

If it's gone one the record I don't mind. If I had my druthers, and if you can print this if you want to, I would drop all of my city contracts immediately.

T: Is that Larry Flynn?

S: Yes, do you know Larry?

T: Okay. Nothing against Larry, but um (--)

S: Yeah. Well I was going to ask you when you said earlier about the contract, whether there's a conflict between what you know, the contract says do, and what you would do otherwise.

T: See, if I had my druthers, if I could support this office with uh, non public private foundation funding, I would immediately, because mostly, now from what I know, and my experience with this is limited, but from what I know, uh, the understanding I have is that the non-profit foundations tend to be a lot less (--) I've got to file five reports. They're all due five days ago. And there's only two people working in the office, and I'm the only person that can do those reports.

T: Um, I think that's true that private foundations are less concerned about the right form being in right (--)

S: Not to say that we wouldn't be responsible, I wouldn't report. Um, and we have to keep a lot of data, which is a good data. And, but for example, uh, one set of data that I have to cover for the state um, has me break things down into seventeen different categories. For the city it's broken down into like twelve categories, but those twelve categories encompasses seventeen. What I've got to do is have two reporting formats. Um, now the city, and I'll put this on the record too, Tim Bragan was very nice about this, has said that I can use my state reporting format for his requirements. So I'll just be able to, it's on the computer, I'll just be able to print it out tonight, and go with that. Um, so in that way they're nice, or sometimes (--) I mean individuals are frequently very nice and very accommodating. They set up a massive computer system tied into some central data bank in Cambridge, and then they call me in again nicely, Bob Bolduc, who is in charge of Computers, a very nice man, says you know, "you're reporting activity in the month of July, for something that happened two months ago." And I say, "I know Bob, but that's because I didn't get the papers until this month." I can't report something that happened in, in June, in the month of June, if I don't have your paper work until July, or August. (T: Right) And he said, "oh yeah, that is true, you can't do it." But see what they're trying to do is make the world conform to the computer, because they've got this massive statewide computer base, data base. And if I put in the data that happens in the real world, it causes the computer to hiccup, and they get all upset. Understandably so. (T: Yeah) But um, and then one other negative thing about state, or the city contracts is um, on occasion it appears that what was a standard operating procedure gets changed with no lead time, or no, no negotiation. I have been for example been working for three months. I had been putting a lot of work on to fifty-six specially designated cases. They were designated as a carry-over from the previous fiscal year. And I was called three weeks ago and told without any negotiation, or anything, that those fifty-six cases I couldn't get credit for. And my complaint was, if that was the case why did you allow me to do

work on this for three months? (T: Umhm) Why didn't you tell me three months ago when I first joined the organization and began doing that work, and you knew I was doing it, and I was reporting on it monthly that I was doing it, why didn't you tell me that those fifty-six weren't credit worthy? (T: umhm) And allow me to spend my time on the people that I can get credit for. Mind you I still have to work with those people. (T: Right) But I know, and I know, you know, that's the way unfortunately the pocketbook works. (T: Yeah) [Conversation going on in background] If I know somebody is going to allow me to get credit, obviously things to take into consideration if it's a life or death situation, (T: right) I don't care about credit. (T: Yeah) That's the sixty percent of the work that I feel is our most important work that I am allowed to do because of these contracts. (T: Umhm) Uh, the crisis intervention, the consumer intervention, the um, crisis (--) Just today I got a case in a calling of wife beating. And uh, it's for a court case, but it's a kind of crisis situation that's got to be dealt with. That I feel is our really important work.

T: And does the city also feel that that is? I mean does that come under their [unclear]?

S: I think, you know, I think individuals all do, but when you're dealing with the city, you're not dealing with individuals as much as you're dealing with um, they have (--) See, why Larry is getting on my back is because he's got to report to the state by the 15th. So he's responding to a monolith, which responds to another monolith. I am responding to, to individuals, to clients. Actually we're, I'm the middle man and I've got to satisfy all the monoliths, as well as satisfy the client, which is I think, the bottom line. Their bottom line of course is the one with the reporting format that they have to give every month. (T: Umhm) So, and I can appreciate they have to get something in by the 15th, and I'm four days late already on the report.

T: Umhm. Yeah. That's a difficult situation. (S: Yeah) One of the things that I frequently make the mistake of I think, is this whole notion, the difference between Laotian, Laos. I mean every, there seems to be, and I've read something that clarified it, but I'd like you to clarify it for me again.

S: Okay. Um, Southeast Asian, or Southeast Asia is that part of the world that includes, depending how broad you want to be, countries like Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, (T: Right) Malaysia. Indochina specifically refers to those countries that were under the French rule for about one hundred years or so. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. (T: Umhm) Um, the refugees that are coming to us from Southeast Asia are Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese.

T: Now is Laotian a, is that a, an appropriate, are people, what I had heard or read is that to use the word Laotian to talk about a person was, they're Laos, they're not Laotian.

S: Okay, in their own language, yeah. In their own language they're called Laos. (T: Okay) Um, the Laos word for the country Laos, is Batate Laos. (T: Okay) Batate means country, and Laos means Laos. (T: Umhm) Whatever that means. Um, (--)

T: So do you talk about Laotians here?

S: I call them Laotians simply because that's, that's the anglofied, the English version of it. (T: Okay) I have occasionally thought about it, because my study has been in philosophy and language. And I'm concerned with things like that. I have never heard anybody, any Laos person say to me they didn't like it. (T: Okay) If they did I would immediately change my performance, because I, again, they're, it's their language, it's their culture, it's their country.

T: I think the way I understood it was that, or the most appropriate and I'm not sure if this is right, is that the people are Laos, and the language they speak is Laotian. (S: Yup) And I don't know if that, that's what I was curious about.

S: Um, you know, I could see somebody who was a scholar in the field of either anthropology, or language making that case. And not being a scholar in either of those disciplines, I would accept their arguments. (S: Right) Um, I would, or would not, depending on the difficulty change my language behavior given that information. (T: Yeah) I think a more important thing to concern oneself with is the non-Laos people from Laos. Um, Laos is a very small country of about three million people. Fully one half of them are non-Laos. The other half are hill tribe people, which are sometimes called, well amongst which are the Hmong and the [unclear]. Oh I can't remember. There's about ten or twelve different tribes, but the major tribe that has come to resettle in the states are the Hmong. (S: Hmong) Um, when I was in JVA working with refugees in Thailand, um, we had one section was called the hill tribe section, which dealt specifically with all the hill tribes. Another section was called the Laotian section, or the Laos section which dealt specifically with the low land Laos, as oppose to the high land. And then they, they combined them, and they called it refugees from Laos section. (T: Umhm) And that included highlander and lowlander, hill tribe, and ethnic Laos as well. So I think that's a much more from the point of view of the refugee from Laos. I think that's a much more important distinction to make.

T: Right. How is that distinction played out here as far as the population [few words unclear].

S: I haven't had a chance really to get a feel for that, because I haven't had much intercourse with um, Hmong per se. And on the few occasions where Hmong have come in, or I have met Hmong, they've always been able to speak Laos, or usually. And I know they have their own agencies as, such as my, this agency here to deal with their own problems. I don't know if it's been any problem. If there has been a problem I would guess it would be the typical one, uh, well they all look the same to me, response on the part of the American. Not realizing that a Hmong person, although they're from Laos, may not speak Laos, or may not know, say, the religious tradition of the lowland Laos, which is Buddhist, (T: Umhm) because they're not the same ethnic group.

T: Is there uh, is there an agency in Lowell to deal with Hmong?

S: I don't think so. I'm almost positive, no. There are practically no Hmong in the Lowell area. I believe Fitchburg there are several Hmong families, and there may or may not be a, an agency there. I have somewhere here in my mess of papers a list of agency servicing all refugees. And there are one or two Hmong in, in the Commonwealth. (T: Umhm) I don't think there's one in Boston, but a couple in one, some of the suburbs.

T: Umhm. What is the, the, what are the agencies that currently, that you're aware of in Lowell, if we just run through those, that deal with Southeast Asians.

S: Uh, there's the International Institute, which is this building from whom we rent a room. Um, they deal very much in, they have actually a Laotian, and a Cambodian, and the Vietnamese on their staff. Uh, then there's the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association which is on Perry Street, and those are the only two that I know off hand. And this actually I have to say is, it's good that you asked me this question, because it's a gap that I should be filling in my own position as Director. Hopefully as we get staffed up, and as I get more familiar with the routine, I'll be able to do that. Um, just let me think for a second. (T: Okay) No, I don't off hand know of any other uh, non-profit agencies such as ours, that deals with Southeast Asians. The city, or government agencies of course, or all the regular government agencies. (T: Yeah, yeah) But none of them specifically deal with Southeast Asian. (T: right) And International Institute as well doesn't deal specifically with Southeast Asian, but they do have a large Southeast Asian clientele. They also deal with a lot of Portuguese and Hispanic. Um, even Russian and Polish to the extent that those people come in, or need help.

T: The uh, you're ongoing, you mentioned English as a second language as being a daily, (S: uh huh) are there other programs that happen here, or out of this office, you know, on a schedule?

S: A loose schedule. We have anywhere from two to four times a months we have workshops. Like on the sixteenth we're going to have um, the owner, the manager, the Director of an insurance agency come in, car insurance, and he's going to talk about car insurance, which is, you know, a lot of people have problems with that, even me. (T: Yeah) And we'll make available to him an interpreter. And he's going to send some materials over if we can get those translated in time, those will be distributed as well. And then the following Wednesday, the 23rd, somebody from CTI, which is the Community Teamwork Inc., (T: umhm, right) which is part of the Lieutenant Governor's Office I believe, um, they come over every month, once a month. And I don't even, I don't know what they're going to talk about, but they're coming at eleven o'clock on the 23rd. And last month it was on housing. This month it could be on anything.

T: Now how many people will you have? How many Laotians will you have?

S: Now here to for it's been pretty much our students who happen to be in, or people that we happen to contact on a mouth to mouth basis, or a face to face basis. Now with the newsletter out, I'm hoping to get a larger turn out. Here to for we've been averaging say, thirty people per event. Uh, I'm hoping now that will go up somewhere like forty, or fifty if possible. But say this is the first time this newsletter will have gone out. I have no experience [unclear] to make any kind of assessment, or guess.

T: Is that the kind of thing that we might be able to photograph? Not that it's terribly (S: exciting) photogenic, exciting, (S: Yeah, exactly, yeah) but, but at the same time it's uh, (--)

S: I have no problem with your coming. And uh, as far as our clients, the refugees go, I can't see

that they would have a problem. I can't see that any of these people who are coming and presenting these workshops would have any problem. If I had a camera I would be photographing. So I would.

T: What about English as a second language? One of those classes to take fifteen minutes of (--)

S: Fine, again. As far as I'm concerned, I would only like to clear that with the teacher. I know her fairly well. I don't see as she would have a problem.

T: I think that they're real descriptive of a particular time, and they'll be a point which we'll all wish we had pictures, even though they're not terribly dramatic occasions.

S: Right. Right. Again, as I say, if I had a camera myself I would be doing this, and I would be able to supply you with photos, but if you want to do that instead, and if you can give us some of those photos.

T: I can supply you with photos. (S: Wonderful) Well that's part of our work. (S: Wonderful, wonderful) So I think, okay.

S: Yeah. Anything. And if you know, after this is over if I get your, you know, the contact number I have already, if something comes up that I think might be worth, worthwhile.

T: Are there other things that, I mean are there times (--) For instance, when a new family comes to town, or, do they, is this one of their stops?

S: Okay, it is, but indirectly. Um, they will come here, but they'll come to a little cubby hole of an office here, which is on Tuesdays and Wednesdays serves as a welfare office. (T: Umhm) Uh, we have an agreement, I forget the name of it, with the welfare department. And we actually got some funding before it, to establish that cubby hole office. And on Tuesday and Wednesday, on Tuesday a Vietnamese Department of Public Welfare caseworker comes in and he sits here for the day, and deals many with Viet clients, because there's no Vietnamese agency in Lowell. And on Wednesdays a Laos speaking Cambodian comes in and does the same thing. Um, and when a new family comes in, uh, within I don't know, an x number of days, they will come here and not go to welfare office. This is partly set up specifically for newcomers, but also other people come in a deal with them as well, but newcomers will come here first. Then after the initial record is, record is taken, then there may be follow-up meetings either here, or at the Department of [unclear] Office on Middle Street?

T: Yeah, Middle Street, right.

S: Right. So they do come here, but not specifically to see us. Now one reason we want these case workers here, is because when they come in for the new arrivals, that's when we get our claws into them, and we say, we're here too. And we try to give them our literature, which explains what our organization is about. Uh, that yellow sheet over there in Laos language, is a description of our organization. It tells a list of services that we offer. At the same time we tell them about E.S.L., and we try to encourage them to um, to take the E.S.L. class. We tell them

about our employment related services. Um, unless their language is good, we encourage them to take E.S.L. first, and then graduate through to employment related services and get a job. Um, we also provide uh, Department of Public Welfare has a booklet in English and Laos. It's a bit dated, but it's a very good comprehensive booklet about (--)

end of tape

LFP-TR-R039

Interview begins with Steve in mid-sentence:

S: ...which you can see is in English and in Laos, (T: uh huh) orientation handbook, and it has oh, a vast variety of things like information about the USA land, climate, people, government, living in the USA, housing, health care, food, employment, education, money, banking, credit, business ownership, transportation, shopping community resources. I think that's an excellent work. It's a bit dated. Uh, it was published in December of '79. And uh, I make, I make about three of these a week, and they get all scoffed up immediately. (T: Is that right) And I try to keep them for newly arriving families, but frequently people who have been here for a long time see it. And uh, the, the contents is so interesting that they just scoff them up and take them. So anyway that's, that's, so we're glad, and that's another reason we want the Department of Social, Department of Public Welfare Social Worker here, so we can make that initial contact with people. Um, and tell them about our services and, and be opened to them.

T: One of the uh, the things this whole project is doing is we're of course interested in a lot of different ethnic groups in (S: right) in Lowell, and we're looking at the city geographically and ethnically. And uh, you know, as always is the case there are a number of stereotypes about different ethnic groups. (S: Umhm) Um, and as stereotypes usually go, portions of them are uh, probably somewhere near accurate, and other parts are totally fictitious and sometimes malicious. Um, you don't really see that, or I haven't run into that so much with Southeast Asian immigrants as much as Hispanic immigrants to be quite honest, here. But what I was wondering is uh, one of the stereotypes that's a very positive one of Southeast Asians is their, their work ethic and the ability to quickly get on their feet and to begin buying you know, their own place to live, or car, or whatever. Could you talk some about that? One of the, you know, I've talked a little bit about your experience with that, and whether that is in fact, a real pattern. Yes, um, to a large extent I think I have to say yes. With the Laotian community specifically, uh, they are very highly employed. And the latest figures I have from my predecessor, they're a bit dated, um, she said that, and she based this on a list of names provided by the Department of Public Welfare, of people receiving welfare payments, 2% of the Laotian living in the greater Lowell area are receiving welfare. 2%, okay. That's like three times lower than the, if you will, Native American. Not Native as an Indian of course, but non-immigrant American. (T: Umhm) Um, so they're very highly employed, very hard working. Um, and my experience has been that I actually, I'm myself in a sense an immigrant, having returned so recently from a long stay overseas. Uh, I sometimes sit here with envy as people come in and tell me about the land, and

their houses that they're buying. One reason they can do it of course, is that um, a family of two people will hold down two and a half jobs. Um, they also live in large extended families. And they, a lot of their house buying is done together as a group, or as groups. Sometimes even though they're not related, friends or groups of families will get together and buy a house. So in this respect they've become very quickly adapted to an element, or an aspect of American society. They still have tremendous number of legal problems when they buy houses. And a lot of people are getting burned, especially land in Florida. The word is out that Laotian refugees want land in Florida. And I've had several cases, and I think that's only part of the total number of people who come in and have bought land sight unseen, or bought land without the assistance of a lawyer, which of course any American (T: would never do) would never, well most Americans I guess would never do.

Um, so I think what happens is a lot of Laos come here, and the first house they buy is probably from a fellow Laos. And then when they go on to bigger and better things, they start dealing directly with Americans, people who are less, they can communicate with less because of the language barrier, and perhaps somebody who are less, other people who are less trustworthy, they get taken frequently, or they find themselves in a less desirable position. So I can confirm that they are very hard working um, uh, and very highly employed. Um, and uh, I don't know why that is. In, in Southeast Asia, in Thailand where I spent my time, uh, the Northeast then Laos, has a reputation of being a very laid back country. And if you wanted, you know, you lived in Thailand and you had been, got used to the hustle of Thailand, you wanted to take a vacation you went, one place you could go was Laos. And people would come back and say, it's like Thailand used to be fifty years ago. It's so quiet, so few cars. And the people are, you know, they're farmers basically. They're very you know, they're country people, and they're just you know, they're really attractive aspect of, of the agriculture society that Americans abroad got used to. [phone rings in background] Excuse me. (T: Umhm. Sure) "Laotian office, this is Steve, may I help you? Yes it is. Uh huh. Sure! Sure, just come on down, or if you want you can send it in the mail and we're put it up. Our address is 79 High Street, uh, you know where that is? Okay, we're in the same building as the International Institute. As soon as you walk in the front door, just keep walking straight ahead, don't go up the stairs and you can't avoid our office. Okay? You're welcome. Buy now." That was a um, a work agency. They want to put a sign up in our office. (T: Uh huh) Which that entire bulletin board, these two bulletin boards are entirely devoted to job openings. This one is mostly, we get from like State agencies for like Library Assistant, that demand a Bachelors in Library Science. Obviously very few of our clients will qualify for those. And the other board is more for uh, the typical kinds of jobs that we can get for our clients, which (--)

T: What, what are some of these?

S: Basically, uh, entry level high tech. Um, assembly as an electronic, or mechanical. Um, custodial, janitorial, things that demand limited language skills, uh, but perhaps good eye to hand coordination, or good control of, of hand. Good motor control. (T: Umhm) Uh, another, that's, that's most of where our people are working. And Massachusetts, as I'm sure you're aware, in the Lowell in particular has been, become a magnet for secondary migration, which is one of our major problems. Um, because of the high tech industry, and the fact that they can, they know they can start here at least \$5.50, if not better per hour, and probably if they're working second,

or third shift they're going to get a ten or fifteen percent differential. And they'll probably be getting benefits as well with these, with the better high tech industries. So it's a very nice package. Uh, and then as persons, as people develop experience and skill in that area, they can transfer it to a better company, and they can perhaps negotiate a better starting wage (T: umhm) uh, because they've got experience. (T: Right) And so that's where most of the people are getting hired. Uh, (--)

T: What are some of those companies that (--) I mean the Wang obviously.

S: Wang obviously. Altron, which is down in Wilmington. (T: Yes) [Airex?], there's one right here in Lowell, which does mechanical assembly for pumps. We have a good deal with them. Um, let's see. Uh, I used to do this on a, a daily basis the past few days. I actually have here, we do a weekly, I don't know if you want that. It's a weekly newsletter that I do, I didn't do it this week because they didn't save the Lowell Sun for me.

T: Oh, this is of job openings?

S: Yup.

T: All of these are jobs?

S: A hundred and fifty. I do that every week. It's done by, it's on my computer. Okay. Here are some of the companies that I list. Now the ones that I know I have people hired for, I'll mention those. There's Altron, Analog and Digital Systems, Analog Devices, Astro Circuit, Baird Corp., Cambridge Tool and Manufacturing, um, these are the ones I know for sure we have people working for. (T: Umhm) Obviously there are many more that I have listed. (T: Right) Electronic Assemblies Inc. Um, no, we don't have any there. Um, Wang we mentioned already. Pro Temps. They're actually a temporary organization, and normally we don't like to deal with them, partly because the City of Lowell doesn't like us to deal with temporaries. (T: Uh huh) But um, we have a very good relationship with one, or two temporary organizations, and um, we find that we can frequently get uh, after awhile we can get permanent jobs for clientele that turn out to be good steady people with that temporary organization.

T: Is there any, what's the employer's uh, you've probably seen reactions, heard reactions from potential employers you know, when either you or a Laotian has contacted them, is that, is it a pretty favorable response?

S: Generally it is favorable, and generally they are calling uh, we get a lot of calls. All the job openings on the far left of that board are, are jobs that have been called in. And on the list you'll see on the far right to a job, if it has the word call, that's a call in rather than something I got from the newspaper. Um, we've been getting the past two weeks a lot more call-ins, and I think that might be a factor, or result of the fact that they college population has gone back to school, and people are hurting, although I'm not sure. Anyway, we try to give priority to those call-ins, because it's a personal contact, and we like to preserve that. And the people are calling us because the word is out that the Laotian is a hard worker. Um, and uh, we, part of our service of course is, is acting as a go-between when problems do arise uh, with companies. And in my

experience here I've only had one or two occasions where that has happened. Um, oh that was another company I didn't think of. It was Bradford Industries right down here on Rogers Street. [Phone rings] Excuse me. "Laotian office, this is Steve. May I help you? Yes. Um, I don't, if I go to the other desk I could probably get it. Can you hold a minute? Okay. They're going to say something about it I bet. Okay, while I'm at the other desk let me see if I can find where Gal keeps his monthly reports. Um, here we are. He has a monthly report. Oh, it's a financial report. Uh, it should be right (--) Okay, here we go, I got it. Let me pull the file. And um, okay, I have July, May, where's August? March, February, January. Huh. Um, I don't, I've got his folder, but I don't see the Auditor's report handy for E.S.L. Yeah, okay. Um, Gal is out sick today and um, he must have, he left very suddenly yes (--) Oh, okay, I've got it. Uh, could you hold on? I'm sorry. Laotian office, this is Steve, may I help you? Hello!" [Tape is turned off, and on again beginning a new conversation]

...by D.E.S. Um, and just my feeling of neatness and appropriateness would make me want to drop the contract for that reason. (T: Yeah) But obviously if I do I cut my throat. (T: Right) My contract with the city says that I'm to work liaison with D.E.S. They have a staffer, Laotian, down at the O.E.T. Offices on Jackson Street. His intake form, his intake process takes fifteen minutes. One piece of paper. Now the theory is, when he finishes his intake, he sends them down to O.E.T. to do their intake. O.E.T.'s intake takes anywhere from an hour to two. And it takes like ten papers. Now the word is out in the refugee community. So when they go down to O.E.T. on Jackson they don't bother to go into O.E.T., they go to, upstairs to D.E.S. And they have a statewide computer bank backing them up, and they get placed, uh, very quickly and very easily. They get placed with us too, (T: Yeah) but it takes a lot of work on their part. And they don't want to go through that. (T: Umhm) Um, so that's another complaint I have, is that um, what I've got to do to get credit, refugee comes to me looking for a job, I have to refer them to O.E.T., so that O.E.T. can refer them to me to find them a job. That's what I have been told to do. And that's what I do now, because I have not been able to fight that system.

T: So in these reports it's actually a sort of quantitative look at where your credit comes from. It's not just (--)

[Lots of conversation and noise in background]

S: Right. The reports, if I don't make those numbers they'll cut my money. They have cut money. [Phone rings] "Laotian Office, this is Steve, may I help you? Oh Gal, good. Uh, you going to be in tomorrow? Okay, because Bob called from O.E.T. about your E.S.L. report and we have lots of problems to deal with, okay! So I just wanted to make sure you're going to come in, because we're going to have to spend some time working on that. Um, I sent it in, but apparently you sent in the, the older one, or the wrong one. Remember we had two names for [cannot transcribe name] and we took [unclear]? Well on the report that got, went over to Bob Boltec, uh, [Yang Yu, Yang Yu?]. I know. So I'm wondering what you sent over, or what you put in the envelope? Well that's only part of the problem. There's many other problems we have to talk about tomorrow, okay? So I just want to make sure you're coming in, because it's important and we have to work on it. Good. Thank you very much. Bye now." Okay. Um, in, in, before I became Director, um, see, with the, with the City of Lowell contract, uh, the way they worked it was after so many months of activity, we could draw down x number of dollars. Um, if we had met x percent of the performance numbers that were agreed in the contract. And I

guess in the first two quarters, I guess the numbers weren't met, or, I'm not really clear of this, this is before I came, they had been met, but the reporting format had been inaccurate. And so it appeared they had not been there. Um, this mind you, again we're dealing with numbers. The fact is, people come in looking for a job. We find them a job and then we say, now we give them a referral letter, and say, "please go down to O.E.T. fill out their forms that we can get credit and we can pay for the rent. We have [unclear] deal with them. They never go down! Or they'll go down and they'll forget their social security card, so the paperwork will never come here. We've done the work, we've got them a job. We've done follow-up, and we get no credit for it. (T: Uh huh) So you know, it's, because of the strict reporting and paper work uh, format, um, I'd say we're missing, this is a purely off the top on my head guestimate, anywhere from twenty to thirty percent of the work we're doing is not being recorded. (T: Uh huh, is unnoticed, yeah) At least. Yeah. (T: frustrating) It is, it's frustrating. It's, you know, the actual work with the refugee is exciting, it's challenging, it's worthwhile. It's when it comes the end of the month, and we make these reports, or when we get a call-in, we're told suddenly that these fifty-six cases that we had been working on are non-credit worthy. Uh, that's when it gets extremely frustrating.

T: What levels of politics are involved in this, dealing with the city? I mean whose, whose agenda is what? Yeah, this is much too early for me to say, partly because I've only been back in the states less than a year. Uh, I've only been coming to Lowell now since around April, and also my nature tends, I am consciously have long been political. I just can't, I mean I, I'm concerned with politics in the sense of following the major issues, and taking a stand on major especially international issues. Um, but the, the small petty politics, the inter-office politics of city, or agency had enough, that's why I burned out in Thailand. And um, I haven't consciously avoided it here, but it's maybe part of my, my nature and make-up now that I, I just don't get involved in it. I'm learning certain people are key people. And I'm learning that if I say things wrong to them, things may happen. But um, I guess that's part and parcel for any job. And to the extent possible, I try to be all, be all things to all people. You know, I try to do my job and uh, deal in a decent objective way with people. And even when I get angry I try not to express that anger, and realize, because most of the people that I'm dealing with from the city um, I would say to date, all of the people that I have dealt with, if it gets to the point where reporting format is incorrect, they don't come down nasty on me. (T: Yeah) Um, and they've always been very understanding. So to that respect I have to say that I'm dealing with a good group of people. Unfortunately they have to pay homage to the [unclear].

T: Follow a system. Yeah, right. Um, I know you got other things to do. One thing that I am interested in, and the whole project is interested in hearing is uh, kinds of immigration stories. Stories that, about families, or individuals who come here and uh, you know, how they get situated. And I don't know that you know any. I've heard several, you know, people talk about folks they know, particularly Southeast Asians who come and they can tell these wonderful American dream stories that within so many years, very few years, you know, they've got a two car garage and a duplex. (S: Yeah) And a couple of Firebirds out front. (S: Yeah.) Are there cases like that that I mean, people you know, or things that come to mind in the [unclear]?

S: Uh, not terribly, many are not in terribly great detail, partly again, because I've, I've only been involved with this particular organization in any great uh, depth, since I began working here in April, (T: Umhm) May actually. April was the first time I came up here and talk to them. Um,

but I have seen people come in and uh, very quickly settle in, partly because they may have had family here before. Um, people who are citizens, the president of our board, he's a citizen, he owns two acres down in Chelmsford. He has this beautiful kitchen garden out back just like it was in Laos, except for the fact that it's a different climate and perhaps a lot of different vegetables, but I mean this would be very typical in Laos where you would have a kitchen garden. Um, and I had to go to his house one day. That's why I know this. And uh, you walk in, and you know, except for some of the pictures in the wall, like the picture of a Buddha, or maybe a picture of some scene from Laos, you would swear you were in a middle class suburban American household. Um, uh, I guess if you sat at the dinner table, you'd also know it was Laotian family, because they'd be eating Laotian food at best. (T: right) So it was, you know, I was quite impressed. A very big TV, a very big stereo system. A big plush couch, coffee table, carpet, and all the rest of it. Um, and I think two cars in the garage. Although I don't think they were Thunderbirds.

So I have seen some of this. I've not again, I guess, been that uh, and my work here keeps me pretty much in the office. So I haven't had that much opportunity to, to get a feel for it, although I have been aware that this is what you say is the case. But I couldn't give you very much detail, other than that.

T: In his case uh, this brings up another thing that I'm interested in. If you were to look at his garden, would you recognize all the vegetables? Or would someone (--)

S: Oh, I couldn't say. No, I would have to say no, simply because I, even when I was in Thailand, you know, I went to the market and picked up a vegetable and bought it. Um, I did a kitchen garden once for myself, but um, (--)

T: But a lot of them are vegetables that would not be made if, I mean, next door neighbors who have been there eight generations wouldn't be growing the same vegetables?

S: I, I really couldn't say on that one. That's an interesting question, but I couldn't say.

T: I'd be curious. What's his, one, we have photographed and documented some gardens, and that might be a thing. (S: Uh huh, sure) I mean it sounds like a [noisy, cannot transcribe a few words].

S: Yeah, um, you want his name and address?

T: Yeah, sure

S: Okay. [Conversation in background] There you go. You can write it down, okay?

T: Oh good. Yeah.

S: It's pronounced Li Ko Sio, Ko Sio.

T: Okay. Let me write that. Li (--)

S: And um, Ko Sio.

T: Um, was he?

S: He is the current president of our board.

T: Okay, so he must have been in Lowell at one time [unclear].

S: I don't really know his, his history. He's been here quite awhile. I'm pretty sure he's an American Citizen.

T: Yeah.

S: Speaks good English. And uh, has, as I say, this very nice house in Bedford. I said Chelmsford, I'm sorry, in Bedford.

T: And a kitchen garden is how you (--)

S: Yeah, and it was quite large, and uh, when I went to visit him he was working in it, uh, which is why I know he has it. And he came walking up and I, I looked with great envy as I saw him doing his, work in the garden.

T: What's the uh, you said most of the lowland uh, Laotians are Buddhist. (S: Right) Do many of them attend the temple in, in North Chelmsford?

S: Okay. Well the North Chelmsford temple is um, is Cambodian. (T: Uh huh) Um, the Buddhism of Cambodia and Laos and Thailand as well is the same if you will branch of Buddhism, [Taravada?], which is different say from like Tibetan Buddhism, or Zen Buddhism. Um, the Monks dress the same, and they use the same language when they do their chanting. So in that respect they're the same. But um, and there is now, they're in North Chelmsford, a Cambodian Monk who speaks Thai, and therefore could communicate with Laotian. And on occasion he has been requested, and has come to do um, ceremonies for the Laotian. But I don't think the Laotian attend their, or go to that temple at all, if ever. They might go you know, an individual. I have been there myself.

T: Yeah, we went to one service.

S: Okay. Um, I've actually been interpreting for a meditation teacher from Cambridge, an American, who has a meditation center in Cambridge.

T: Yeah, I think I met, I think he was there the morning I was there.

S: Okay. So that's the only reason I've been there. I'd say on occasion. Now there is a Laos Monk now living in, in Lowell, but I understand he came to the states on, on a Visa from France. He had resettled in France. And prior to what is, what I call the, the Buddhist Lent, it's actually the rain, the rainy season where Monks are suppose to stay in one space for about three or four

months. Um, he somehow got permission to stay in the states, but I don't think he's, he's not here as an immigrant, or as a refugee, he's here as a visitor. And he may be required to leave, or they may be asking permission for him to stay indefinitely. Um, but they have an apartment for him somewhere, I don't know the address. They call it the Laotian Buddhist Temple here in Lowell. Uh, I believe they do have ceremonies on a weekly basis there. (T: Umhm) Um, they had one here a few weeks ago, quite, you know, attended by quite a few people. I don't know how many.

T: In International?

S: Yeah, we have a big room over here. Yeah. I don't know how many people were here, but they did have a lot. So they do have ceremonies, and I presume people are attending. Numbers, I could have, you know, what can you fit in that hall? At the most maybe two or three hundred (T: uh huh) out of three thousand.

T: Who would be, is there a good contact for the Laotian temple?

S: Um, I can give you the name of the man that I think is the president of their Board. (T: Okay) I don't know if I have his, I have his sir name, but it might take some time to find, but his name is Somkhith, Somkhith. And he speaks English. He's a teacher at some school. His telephone number here in Lowell is 458-9814. And that's over on Middlesex Street, somewhere down near St. Joseph's. (T: Okay) Uh, again, the number is here. The address is near somewhere, but it's (--)

T: How do you spell his name?

S: S O, uh, S O M K H I T. Somkhith. S O M K H I T.

T: Okay.

S: And I believe he's the president of the board of the Buddhist Association, and um, if not he would know who is. He speaks good English. (T: Okay) And he's a teacher in um, I think some elementary school here, or the elementary level.

T: Okay. What about any traditional artist or crafts people? Have you run across (--)

S: Okay, there were a group of girls who uh, had got together and done some training in dancing. And they had done a few uh, dance shows since my arriving here. Um, I have not been in contact. I have not been in contact with them for quite awhile, um, and quite frankly it's a little bit of uh, I don't know if you'd call it a problem, if it's that big to call a problem, but um, part of the situation is that this office had done a lot of the administrative work. They did a show at the Folk Festival.

T: The National Folk Festival?

S: Yeah, the National Folk Festival. And the Board was going through a process of change at

that time, and I wasn't Director then, but um, I'm ending up paying the bills. And um, I think that this office should (--) Now they get, the girls get a stipend for that dance, but the stipend actually comes to the organization. Now what the Board has told me is that the money goes all to the girls. And I've told the Board that I think from now on, if this office is going to be involved in that, that we should be getting a percentage of any stipends, simply to cover our administrative overhead. (T: Umhm) And I don't think the Board likes that. So what's happening is I think the Board is now going to do all of that on their own without using the office. Um, the reason I give you that background is because um, although I had been trying to contact these people, I have not been able to make contact, and they don't come in to see me. (T: I see) And I think they think that I'm somehow taking something away from them. And so they don't want to deal with me. Um, again, Lee would know uh, who these people are, and where to contact. I know some of their names and I have phone numbers, but every time I call I'm told that that person is not home. And when I ask to them to call back, they never call back. So I get a feeling that something, (T: okay) you know, we somehow lost communication unfortunately.

T: Right. Okay. I've got their names too, from uh, but I don't, I'll call the (--)

S: Okay. Okay. Yeah. Other than that um, there are, there's nobody that I know of who is involved in either the dance, or other aspects of the uh, the Arts and Crafts of Laos. Um, we do have um, a small small grant from the Lowell Historical Society for the preservation of traditional arts. And that is currently under review by the Board, uh, because in the transition, in the past couple of months that got, no activity took place. So what's going to happen in the future I don't know.

T: Okay. All right. Well I think I may touch base with you about uh, photographing (S: great) certainly the English as a Second Language Class.

S: Uh huh. Sure.

T: Because I think those would be important to have a couple of rolls of film of that.

S: Uh huh. I think you can get maybe five or six shots out of it. [Laughs]

T: But you know, some day people, we'll wish we had photos of that. I think we should probably do it.

S: Yeah. Yeah.

T: So uh, what's, what's the best way to proceed on that? You need to run it by the teacher obviously?

S: Yeah, say uh, she's, I'm sure she'll say yes. The um, you know the best thing to do is, you can see what's happening today, and I got some work tomorrow. (T: Yeah) Could you call me tomorrow morning? (T: Yeah) Between 9:00 and 12:00? (T: Yeah) And that will force me to remember, and Rita will be here. I can just get up, go over and say, "hey, if Tom Rankin comes in and takes some photos someday, would you care?"

T: Okay.

S: And we might even be able to set a date.

T: Yeah, we can do it maybe the following day if it's okay with her.

S: Fine. You know, if it's fine with her it's fine with me. Yeah.

T: Okay. Okay, I'll call you in the morning between 9:00 and 12:00.

S: Good, that would, that would be most convenient for me.

T: Okay.

S: Uh, she's leaves you know, let's see, I want to make sure I have nothing on for tomorrow. Yeah, I don't. Tomorrow is Thursday, yeah. Um, classes end at twelve. She's usually out of here by 12:00 unless she's in a rush. So if you do call before 12:00 it's best.

T: Okay. Good. Well thanks Steve for, (S: okay) I know you got other [few words unclear].

S: Actually, I know I'm not going to get anything done until the work (--)

End of tape